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SUBJECT: CZECH REPUBLIC: VISIT OF MADELYN SPIRNAK, SENIOR ADVISER FOR AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY

1. (U) SUMMARY: Over the course of an intense two-day visit to the Czech republic (July 27-28), Senior Advisor for Agricultural Biotechnology, Madelyn Spirnak met with senior government officials and US business leaders to advance the US position on transgenic crops and to enlist Czech aid in working with the European Union to ensure that agricultural biotechnology is an accepted and viable option for growers and consumers. The highlights of her visit included a television interview with the Chairman of the Czech Food and Beverage Federation, and critical advocacy at the Ministries of Agriculture and the Environment. END SUMMARY

GMOs in the Czech Republic

2. (U) The Czech Republic has a considerably more positive view of transgenic crops than their regional neighbors, and this trend seems to be continuing. Recent draft legislation on the minimum distances for coexistence of GMO crops and conventional crops appears to be an improvement over current regulations, facilitating transgenic crop production in the Czech Republic. Czech consumers are generally neutral concerning GMOs in their food products, although certain grocery store chains require products to be "GMO-free". Czech researchers are actively working in the agricultural biotechnology field, and political parties across the spectrum accept a pragmatic, science-based approach to the use of GMOs.

3. (U) There has been limited political debate about the future of GMOs in the Czech Republic, primarily because the Czech agricultural sector is responsible for only 3% of GDP, although GMO and organic farming are small, albeit growing, sectors in the agricultural market. A recent law passed by the Senate and the Parliament to exclude civic associations from the approval process for GMOs will likely result in limiting public debate on the issue for the near future.

Meetings with the Ministries

4. (U) Spirnak met with an eight-member team from the Ministry of Agriculture, led by Frantisek Sladek, Director General of the Section of Food Production at the Ministry of Agriculture and Director of the recently established Food Authority. They discussed how current regulations on co-existence would significantly narrow the required distances between GMOs and conventional crops under legislation proposed by the Ministry. The draft calls for the minimum distance for conventional crops to shrink from 100 meters to 50 meters and for organic crops to fall to 200 meters from the current 600 meter minimum. The ministry is comfortable with the current pragmatic "science-based" approach, and does not foresee a change in the approval process that is currently in place. Conversely, they are not actively lobbying for support of biotech crops among neighboring countries, which have a more skeptical view of GMOs.

5. (SBU) At the Ministry of the Environment, Spirnak met with Mr. Karel Blaha, Director of the Environmental Risks department at the Ministry. Blaha, like his colleagues at the Ministry of Agriculture, is supportive of a science-based approval process for GMOs. However, Minister Libor Ambrozek is not enthusiastic about GMOs since he needs the political support of the Green Party. While representing the Czech government at EU meetings, ministry officials have abstained from voting in 7 of the 9 cases, in part to avoid upsetting other member states. Their other votes were split: they voted to keep the ban on Bt176 because the European Commission hasn't approved it and because the Czech Commission had not yet tested it sufficiently. In the case of MON810, however, the Czech government voted to revoke the ban since the EC approved MON810 and it was also previously approved for use in the CR.

Press Coverage

6. (U) On the heels of a successful presentation to the Federation of Food and Drink Industries of the Czech

Republic, Spirnak was interviewed by two print journalists and recorded an interview with a major Czech television channel that was later broadcast as part of their evening economic news. These press contacts were critically important for shaping the nascent opinion of Czech consumers, who are still unfamiliar with GMOs.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The Czech Republic is at an important crossroads. As pragmatists, they have an open mind to GMOs and understand the benefits that they offer, hence the domestic research and use of GMOs. However, they are a minority in the region, and are unwilling to rattle the
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cages of other EU members to change this situation. This presents a problem if creeping EU legislation (i.e., an EU-wide regulation on coexistence that is rumored to be in the development phase) makes it more difficult for the Czech Republic to follow its own course on GMOs. We should continue to engage actively with Czech government officials to reinforce the positive biotech policies they have been following and seek continued support within the EU.

18. This cable was cleared by Madelyn Spirnak, Senior Advisor for Agricultural Biotechnology.